

Review Essays

Enlightenment Rationalism and the Politics of Romanticism

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***Romantic Rationalist: A William Godwin Reader*, ed. Peter Marshall (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2017), 169 pp., \$17.95 paper.**

***Zoe Beenstock, The Politics of Romanticism: The Social Contract and Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 237 pp., \$105 cloth.**

Peter Marshall and Zoe Beenstock add welcome volumes on nineteenth-century studies to the ever-growing project of bringing together Enlightenment and Romanticism – two distinctive fields of studies in literature, philosophy, and political theory. Their volumes will appeal across the disciplines also because they offer refreshing ways to explore Enlightenment rationalism and the politics of Romanticism through the works of major figures from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries, especially William Godwin.

Godwin's political and literary works are of interest to students, teachers, and scholars of literature, philosophy and political theory. Marshall offers a much needed collection of Godwin's works at an affordable price. The wide-ranging collection includes selected passages from Godwin's best-known political works: *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), *The Enquirer* (1797) and *Of Population* (1820). It also includes those from Godwin's less discussed political tracts: *An Account of the Seminary* (1783), *Considerations of Lord Grenville's and Mr. Pitt's Bills* (1795), and *Thoughts on Man, His Nature, Production and Discoveries* (1831). There are also selected passages from Godwin's controversial *Memoirs of the Author of the Rights of Woman* (1798), two of his best-known novels: *Things as They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794), and *Fleetwood; or, the New Man of Feeling* (1805); and one of his less-known novels, *Mandeville: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century* (1817). That said, a large part of the selection comes from *Political Justice* and *The Enquirer*. This is understandable for two reasons. First, the book is under 200 pages. Second, the focus of the volume is to illustrate Godwin's political philosophy rather than his literary production.

Marshall's critical edition of Godwin's works meets the current interest in reviving Godwin's reputation in Romanticism, philosophy, and political studies. This is the third edition of the volume since it was first published in 1986. The new edition is accompanied with an up-to-date bibliography. There is a new foreword by John Clark, a professor of philosophy, who is happy to endorse Marshall's efforts in "demonstrating Godwin's rightful place as a major figure in the history of modern political thought" (xiv). Clark illustrates various important issues such as utilitarian ethics, libertarian education, freedom of thought and expression, property and economic inequality, direct democracy, and voluntary confederation amongst "Godwin's greatest contributions to modern political theory" (xv). The critical introduction written by Marshall to accompany the volume is reader-friendly and accessible even to newcomers to Godwin's political thoughts. Apart from a biographical context that details Godwin's long, prolific writing career and a critical evaluation of his influence, Marshall gives an insightful analysis of Godwin's anarchist theory and practice.

What makes the volume stand out from most critical editions of Godwin's works? The variety of Godwin's works represented is one strength. Another is that Marshall's edition is organized thematically rather than by individual text in order to better showcase Godwin's place in modern political philosophy. The book is divided by Marshall into seven chapters: "Summary of Principles," "Human Nature," "Ethics," "Politics," "Economics," "Education," and "Free Society." Each chapter is then divided by Marshall into six headings (sometimes up to twenty) to treat several smaller but closely related topics. These topics show the Enlightenment roots in Godwin's rationalism, moral philosophy, and political theory. There are a number of examples: equality, individuality, and society and perfectibility; morality, justice, private and domestic affection, benevolence, duty, and rights; political enquiry, government, social contract; patriotism, monarchy, democracy, freedom, anarchy, and decentralization. In this way, one gets to read selected passages from *Political Justice* and *Caleb Williams* on the same pages under the headings of "Law" and "Punishment" in the chapter of "Politics" (91-92), and those from *Fleetwood* and *Mandeville* on the same page under the heading of "Effects of Unequal Distribution" in the chapter of "Economics" (116). The thematic selection is both refreshing and illuminating: it enables a reader to grasp the gist of Godwin's political theory and practice at one glance and also see how his political and literary works may fit in with one another in the wider context of Enlightenment political philosophy.

Beenstock's monograph, based on a doctoral thesis, also meets the current interest in reviving the Enlightenment legacy of political philosophy in Romanticism studies. Scholars have been fascinated by the political contexts of Romanticism since the rise of new historicism in the 1980s. Some are interested in the revolutionary politics of the 1790s. Others look up to Jean-Jacques Rousseau as a great inspiration for English Romanticists. Still, some critics, following the lead of M.H. Abrams, are interested in German Idealism among the Enlightenment legacy in Romanticism while setting clear boundaries between the eighteenth-century and Romantic periods. Since then, it has become typical to study, for instance, Samuel

Taylor Coleridge and Immanuel Kant in order to better understand the influence of German philosophers upon English Romantic writers. By the 1990s, however, the focus on German philosophy and the boundaries between Enlightenment and Romanticism have been much criticized. On one hand, critics influenced by the work of James K. Chandler have pointed to another source – Scottish Enlightenment philosophy – whose impact upon German Idealism and English Romanticism demands critical attention.

On the other hand, the boundaries between Enlightenment and Romanticism have become increasingly blurred. For instance, Rousseau, who was a major figure in Enlightenment philosophy, has also been considered as a major figure in Romanticism: his *Confessions* (1782) has been read as a work of “Romantic Autobiography” (see, for instance, Eugene Stelzig). After the publication of Nancy Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*, scholars in eighteenth-century and Romanticism studies have paid more attention to *The Social Contract* (1762), one of Rousseau’s best-known treatises. A recent trend is to study either Rousseau’s social contract theory or Romantic sociability – the history of sociability in the Romantic period – through Jürgen Habermas’s public sphere theory. Beenstock’s book is of particular interest in this context, since she traces sources of social contract theory back to the pre-Enlightenment period, in which Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* (1651) is said to have established a model for the theory. Beenstock builds on Hobbes’ and Rousseau’s social contract theory, which, she argues persuasively, is a helpful approach to illuminate the seemingly diverse contexts of the Scottish Enlightenment, German Idealism, and the revolutionary politics of the 1790s.

The subtitle of Beenstock’s book – “Literature and Social Contract” – may illustrate a central question that her book seeks to answer: “What can Romanticism’s relationship to social contract theory tell us about the relationship between literature and philosophy?” The answer, Beenstock proposes, will solve two problems in Rousseau, Romanticism, and Nineteenth-Century studies. First, as a literary critic, she is concerned about the ways in which social contract philosophy is sometimes treated in these studies as “a primary source dictating the concerns of literature.” Indeed, it

is not uncommon that Rousseau's novels are sometimes treated as a brief reference to his philosophy. The purpose of her book is, therefore, to restore the critical imbalance between literature and philosophy. Second, some critics have claimed that the relationship between political philosophy and literature follows a "direct, practical model of positive influence or application." One central argument of Beenstock's book is that the relationship between political philosophy and literature "takes a complex, circuitous route that foregrounds conflicts between two forms" (2). Another central argument of her book is that "Romanticism develops as a critique of radical changes in political theory of the mid-seventeenth to late eighteenth centuries and the new theory of a social contract" (1). In addition to Enlightenment philosophy, Rousseau's political and literary works, including *The Social Contract* and the novel *Julie ou la Nouvelle Heloise* (1776), and his impact on Coleridge, William Wordsworth, Godwin, and Mary Shelley are central to the book's arguments.

To better illustrate these arguments, her book is thematically arranged into three parts: philosophy, poetry, and novels. Apart from the introduction, which is aptly entitled "Romanticism and the Social Contract," there are six chapters, each focusing on one single author: Hobbes, Rousseau, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Godwin, and Mary Shelley. Chapters on Hobbes and Rousseau give a comprehensive context of the social contract theory from the pre-Enlightenment period to the revolutionary politics of the 1790s. The first chapter discusses Hobbesian social contract traditions and gives an impressive array of British and German philosophers: Locke, Shaftesbury, David Hume and Adam Smith; Kant, Schiller, and Hegel. There is also a good discussion of some closely related topics in the social contract theory, among them self, society, sociability, individualism, sovereignty, freedom, servitude, slavery, reason, and feeling. Among these, individualism serves as an unifying element to unite the social contract theory and Romanticism. For instance, Hobbes' *Leviathan*, famous for his theory of political sovereignty, promotes absolute power in governments and institutions to restrain the passions of individuals, which are "commonly more potent than their Reason" (qtd Beenstock 20). Shaftesbury and Mandeville reject

Hobbesian individualism and return to “the premise that sociability is grounded in the senses and feeling” (24). The chapter ends by relating this intellectual history of individualism to the rise of the *Anti-Jacobin Review* and Jacobin novels such as *Edmund Oliver* as an example of the revolutionary politics of the 1790s. The next chapter foregrounds Rousseau’s works within the wider context of Enlightenment theories of sociability, “which all increasingly promoted all new individuality through a focus on private feeling” (44-45). Beginning with Gary Kelly’s work, the tendency to interpret Rousseau’s sentimental novels as “apolitical” has been much criticized (67). Beenstock explores the novel *Julie* to illustrate the problem of Rousseau’s social contract theory and practice. She rightly suggests that marriage in the novel symbolizes a social contract, and that the novel is about the conflicts between Julie’s private feeling for Peter Saint Prex and the social demands of her marriage placed on her by her spouse Wolmar and society in general. But Beenstock’s claim about the novel as “a virulent critique of Rousseau’s social contract theory” (51) is less convincing. This may contradict her earlier argument that “*Julie* and *The Social Contract*, written in tandem, develops parallel concerns” (47).

The chapters on Coleridge and Wordsworth, which read *The Rime of Ancient Mariner* and *The Prelude* as responses to Rousseau’s social contract theory, offer a new approach to these canonical Romantic poems. But is it a valid one? Beenstock rightly reinterprets the “inner tensions” or “the sense of angst and unease, common in Coleridge’s writings” as “drawn on the strain between the individual and the social contract tradition” (73). There is also a good discussion of the references to Rousseau in Coleridge’s works from the early 1790s to the late 1820s. These references, some of which “have been relatively neglected” in Romanticism studies (74), appear in Coleridge’s letters, Bristol lectures, *The Friend* and *On the Constitution of the Church and the State*. That the *Anti-Jacobin Review* identifies Coleridge with Rousseau in the poem “New Morality” is clear. While it is clever to suggest that the wedding and the guests in *The Rime of Ancient Mariner* symbolize some kind of a social contract, it is difficult to prove that Coleridge’s poem refers to Rousseau’s theory. By contrast, *The Prelude* has

often been compared with Rousseau's *Confessions*. Beenstock's attempt to understand "Wordsworth's response to Rousseau in a framework that looks beyond *The Confessions*" to relate "*The Prelude*'s politics to the problems of social contract theory" is admirable. It is clear that Wordsworth reads *The Social Contract* and quotes Rousseau's phrase of "general will" in "A Letter to the Bishop of Landoff" (1793). Beenstock rightly interprets, for instance, the episode of the summit of Snowdon in *The Prelude* as Wordsworth's reflection on "supremacy of individual mind, which has weathered revolution and crisis" (116). But it is unclear that the poem's individualism refers to Rousseau's theory. Moreover, it seems quite controversial for her to argue that the poem is "about the fraught status of individuals with a new configuration of civilisation rather than an apotheosis of private imagination created by political disillusionment" (100), the latter interpretation being a standard view of Wordsworth's poem in Romanticism studies.

The chapters on Godwin and Shelley are more promising. Reading *Fleetwood* and *Frankenstein* as their critiques of Rousseau's social contract theory is not exactly a new approach to these novels in Romanticism studies, but it is a valid one. Rousseau and Godwin are both philosophers who write sentimental novels to illustrate their political theories. Recent critics have united Godwin's political philosophy with Rousseauvian sentimental literature. This paves the way for Beenstock to exploit Rousseau's social contract theory to illuminate how Godwin's "literary representations of a private self [dramatize] conflicts of political theory" (8). While many critics have read *Political Justice* alongside *Caleb Williams*, Beenstock offers an alternative way of reading it alongside *Fleetwood*. It is clear that Godwin quotes Rousseau's *Emile* to illustrate his own idea of individualism in *Political Justice*, and that Godwin makes a specific reference to Rousseau in *Fleetwood*. Indeed, the hero of Godwin's novel is "raised in the spirit of *Emile*" and *Fleetwood* is a "cautionary tale of a [Rousseauvian] misanthrope and his painful path of socialisation as he becomes a reformed 'man of feeling,' an ironic type for a regenerated society" (137). Hence, Beenstock's argument that "Godwin presents misanthropy (and subsequent misogyny) as an inevitable response to a larger culture of individualism, and not the

personal failing of the individual” (142) is far more convincing. The chapter on Shelley is the most readable and perhaps the best in the book. The influence of Rousseau’s novels on *Frankenstein* is well known. Critics have long commented on “Victor’s excessive individualism.” Recently, Diana Reese has made a connection between the Creature’s helpless state and Rousseau’s “general will” to criticize the social contract theory for gender exclusion: the planned female mate never materializes in the novel. Beenstock notes that the title page of *Frankenstein* alludes to Rousseau as the “Citizen of Geneva” in *The Social Contract* (161). All these enable Beenstock to argue convincingly that Shelley’s novel “forms a detailed critique of social contract theory” and the “failure” of Rousseau’s and other Enlightenment versions of sociability, for “a social contract founded on exclusion ultimately comprises all members of society, leaving them solitary” (165).

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